



gary hume mum

Essay by Alexander Nagel

MATTHEW MARKS SPRÜTH MAGERS



Jill Hume in 1968

Recent research indicates that our memories of childhood events are spotty not just because they happened a long time ago, but because new cell growth in our brains comes at the price of a certain amount of wipe out. That's why memories before the age of four are so rare, and also why so many of us have a memory gap around the age of six or seven, a boom time for grey-matter production. Add to that the calcification of our senescent parents' memories of us — over time reduced to a few well-tested anecdotes, not even really memories — and what remains from childhood is very little. We have just a few images in the end, though they are often heightened in color, like glistening images in stained glass. But instead of the hallowed scenes depicted in church windows, our personal treasuries typically feature stray episodes from ordinary life, events not very different from many others just like them. The logic of their selection is inexplicable to us, and so we trust in the mysterious power that enshrined them, accepting that these are the memories that glow for us. All of this is an admonition to treasure the ordinary events that make up our present lives, even before the hidden logic of selection plucks them out and turns them into the jewels of future memories, or consigns them to oblivion.

From about the age of five, when the brain's structure and size are set, to the age of thirteen and the first sounding of adult anxieties, childhood unfolds in a fairly tight frame. Recently I decided to assemble my own little treasury of childhood vignettes, all drawn from one street and its surrounding neighborhood in a New York suburb during the 1970s. For once in my writing life, I was the undisputed expert on the matter at hand. No one else could have a say on how best to shape these little reminiscences. Writing them down was in many ways like working as an artist. The difference is that I don't expect anyone to see or care about my little treasury, apart from maybe my wife and son.

Artists, by contrast, so long as they're creating art, work at making a statement or gesture that will be externalized in the world. That gesture toward a public is part of what makes it art, even if it is never shown, and even if the artwork is of a self-abnegating or withholding sort. Yet the artist's work is not continuous with the world; it is presented as something that asks for particular attention; the expectation and reality of that particular attention is part of what makes the work take the shape that it does. People bring what they have to what is offered; perhaps they discover a gap between what they've known until then and what they're encountering now. The work and the person engaging it then set about inhabiting that gap.

Gary Hume begins with source material, often already-existing images, and he reworks them. He traces and draws, extracting from them a pattern that calls for a certain framing. He then projects the graphic idea onto a support. He considers colors for

the various areas designated by the drawing and goes about mixing them, crafting not only each color in itself but also the mutual impact of the juxtaposed colors. It is a process of semi-deliberate fragmenting and reassembling, an orchestration of two-dimensional shapes suggesting three-dimensional forms, along with intervals that intermittently connote spaces. The result has the quality of bringing something into focus provisionally, but not merely in a perceptual sense. It has stabilized a sensibility, a tone, even an emotion. My sense of it is that the work's sensibility is provided primarily by the drawing, its tone by the color. These are what sustain the emotion, which is not in the painting but in the gap created and then inhabited when it encounters a viewer.

Sometimes the arrival of the drawing and the colors happens without hesitation or correction. These are the magic paintings, as Hume calls them. Other times what ensues is a months-long labor, which he calls finding the painting. This usually involves painting on top of previous applications and, if that goes on too long, hitting reset: removing accumulated attempted colors, smoothing the painting back down to level, and re-treating it with a brownish underpainting that starts things off again. One of the most curious sights in his studio is the collection of large upright dominoes of smoothed and re-browned panels leaning against one another — not yet found, but not mute. They lean there humming, waiting to receive another go.

Finding a painting means, for the artist, "trying to make something that can be in the world and have its own sense of self, not be an echo of my sense of self."¹ When it reaches that point, the work is relatively far from the memory or photo that served as its initial working material. It is no longer an illustration of that material, if it ever was. "The original image is only there to allow the painting to exist."² A painting that has been made to exist and can stand on its own is now something that has become self-sufficient. It is now independent of the person who produced it and also, maybe, free of the time in which it was made. It now stands in the world and faces a viewer. It isn't available to viewers because it's been put on display; it's put on display because it now speaks to viewers, of whom the artist is one. It is able to stand and speak not because the artist considers it perfect, but just because it now exists with other things in the world. "The paintings are a series of flawed individuals. They're like the real world. They're not perfect fictions. They really do exist. They're not fantasies."³

Known for his glossy paintings on aluminum, more recently Hume has started working on paper, still with enamel house paint but to different effect, as the treatment of the paper causes the surface to ripple. The smooth paintings reflect, which is to say they include us, their viewers. Apparitions of shifting light and shade playing over the surface, we are always



Mum Twisting, 2015. Enamel paint on paper.
81 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 46 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 207 x 118 cm

part of their subject matter. The works on paper, instead, cause us to disappear before a surface that is both fragile and, strangely, suddenly complete. These concretized yet floating images seem to have taken a more direct route from the personal to the external. In contrast to previous work, which contains references to the wider world, occasionally employing mediated images with strong political implications, the recent paintings work from the materials of the artist's life. There are personal memory paintings on aluminum, yet I wonder whether this latest body of personal work arose in meaningful cooperation with the use of the paper support.

My sense is that Hume has retained more images from his childhood than I have. They tend to resolve into close-up, child-level views of chairs, of leaves, of animals, of the shore, and of what we gather are his mother's shirts, cardigans, and dresses. These are contrasted with present-day portraits of his wife and of his now ailing mother, as well as what appear to me to be present-tense (that is, adult-viewed) figures of nudes, which tend to have longer lines, substantial portions of figure, and more sustained attention spans.

"Mum," the title of this gathering of works and of more than one painting in it, is not mother in any objective sense but always *my* mum, *your* mum. The word implies a conversation that you are either part of or not. Only very few viewers will have any idea what memories Hume is working from, rendering the Mum paintings to some extent mum in the other sense, more than his other paintings. Yet we are not being presented simply with renderings of memories or personal associations. Here, as elsewhere, "the original image is only there to allow the painting to exist." The paintings are now in the world as themselves. Mumness is a theme and a tone that attaches to them, and the paintings' management of those themes and that tone are now part of what we work with when we encounter the paintings.

Very few people will know why the black painting with the white dot in the middle is titled *Mum* (2015). I know only because I asked and received this reply: "The mum dot you refer to was inspired by my mum's love of the sky and her learning astral navigation when she crewed on yachts. She would marvel at the infinite solitude." I don't think it is necessary to know this, though it is important to register the mumness of the title. For the artist, the association made it possible to make a black painting with a white dot in the middle, something he probably would not have dared to do otherwise. The personal path to it has produced a painting that won't sit still in a category. It sets up a reductive formal experience on the part of the viewer while consistently undermining it. The painting's title pulls us away from seeing it in abstract terms — it points us to the wobbliness of the whole, which suggests a personal

view through the black. The painting signals us away from the shoals of high seriousness while at the same time preventing an abrupt landing on the shores of cute. We remain at sea, without a story, in a state of feeling that is both familiar and unfamiliar. We inhabit the gap with the painting.

In front of another *Mum*, this one painted on aluminum in 2017, we find ourselves in a similar position. The depiction is more straightforward this time, a blue-violet silhouette easily discernible against the pink background. But the woman's facial features can only be seen from certain angles, sending us bobbing and weaving until the reflected light picks out her mouth, nose, and eyes. Portraits of familiars always open up an emotional fissure between the artist and the viewer, who will never know the sitter the way the artist does. In this case the gap is multiple, as Hume himself is losing his mother to dementia. If losing my father in the same way is any guide, the relationship we have to the affected person becomes, over time, like that which we might have to a portrait: we engage a presence that is there and not there; the relationship is real, but it isn't symmetrical. These various gaps are the painting's occasion. Hume told me he chose colors that would create "a haze between you — the viewer — and the subject, Mum's distance from herself."⁴

In the paintings based on the boy Gary's experience, the gap between his memory and our viewing is especially wide, but in another way it is closed by the directness of the result. This effect comes through particularly in the paintings on paper, which have a paradoxical reality about them, as if something has been externalized that wasn't quite ready to be. The strawberry in *Ripe* (2015) is presented in glorious isolation and blatant protuberance — how things looked during childhood, perhaps, when you felt no clear distinction between your eyes and your mouth. There is no fragmentation here, no projection, no tracing, no recombination, apparently no processing — just shape-making and painting. Each achene of the strawberry is painted one after the other, all clearly elements in a series, yet painted with loving attention to the individuality of each one's shape. They almost organize themselves into waving rows making their way around the berry, growing larger near the center where the fruit swells towards us, but in the end they fail to hold a pattern. Our eyes let them fall into a happy, random spread. Was this one of the magic paintings? I don't know.

—Alexander Nagel

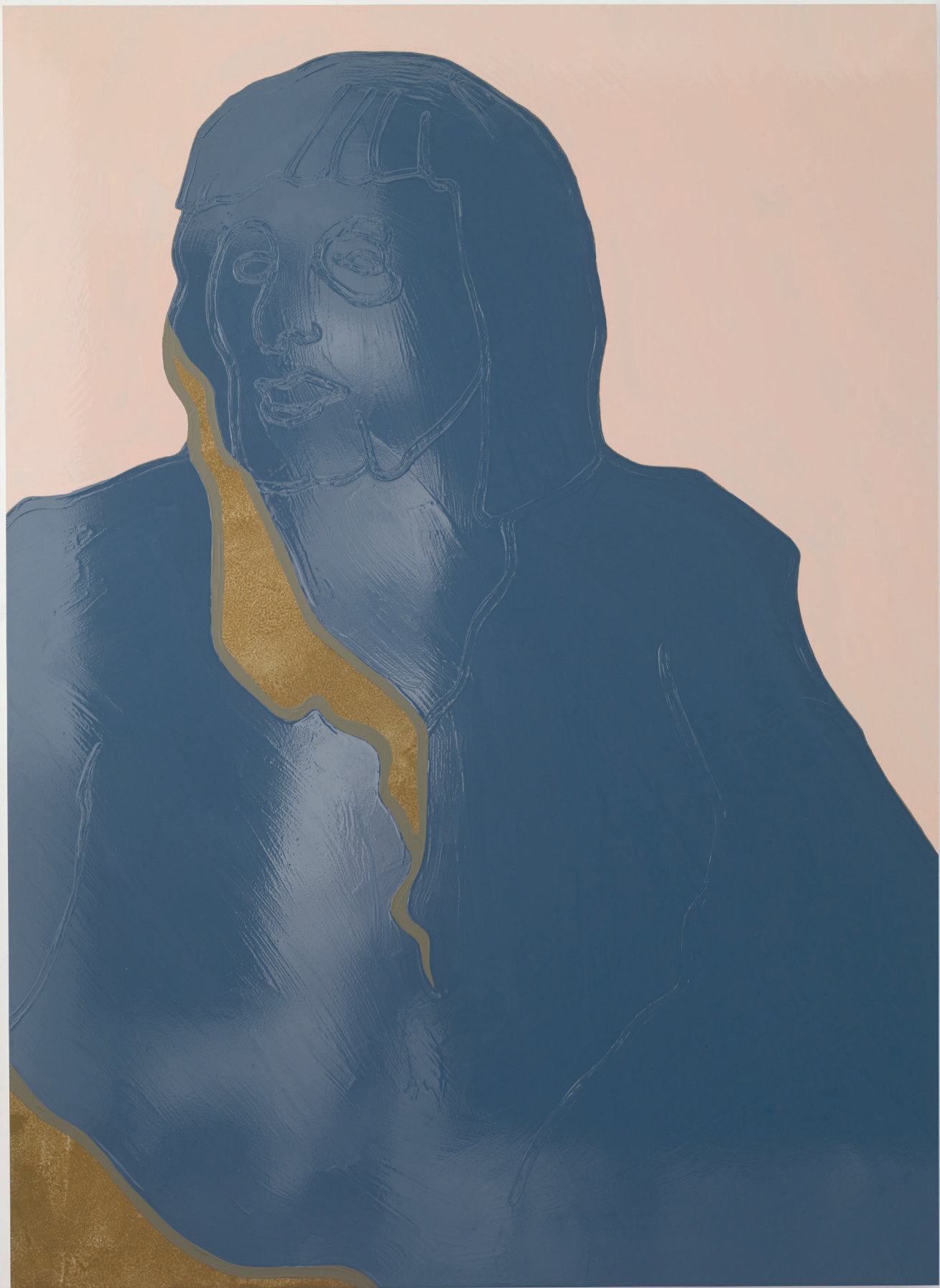
NOTES

1. Hume in "Ulrich Loock—Gary Hume: A Conversation," *Gary Hume* (London: Other Criteria, 2009), p. 6
2. Ibid, p. 9
3. Ibid, p. 10
4. Hume in an e-mail to the author, July 20, 2017

Mourning, 2016
Enamel paint on aluminum
70 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 52 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches; 180 x 133 cm



Mum, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
53¼ x 38⅝ inches; 135 x 98 cm



Grandma Looks at the Garden, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
40 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 inches; 102 x 122 cm



Georgie, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
48 x 39 inches; 122 x 99 cm



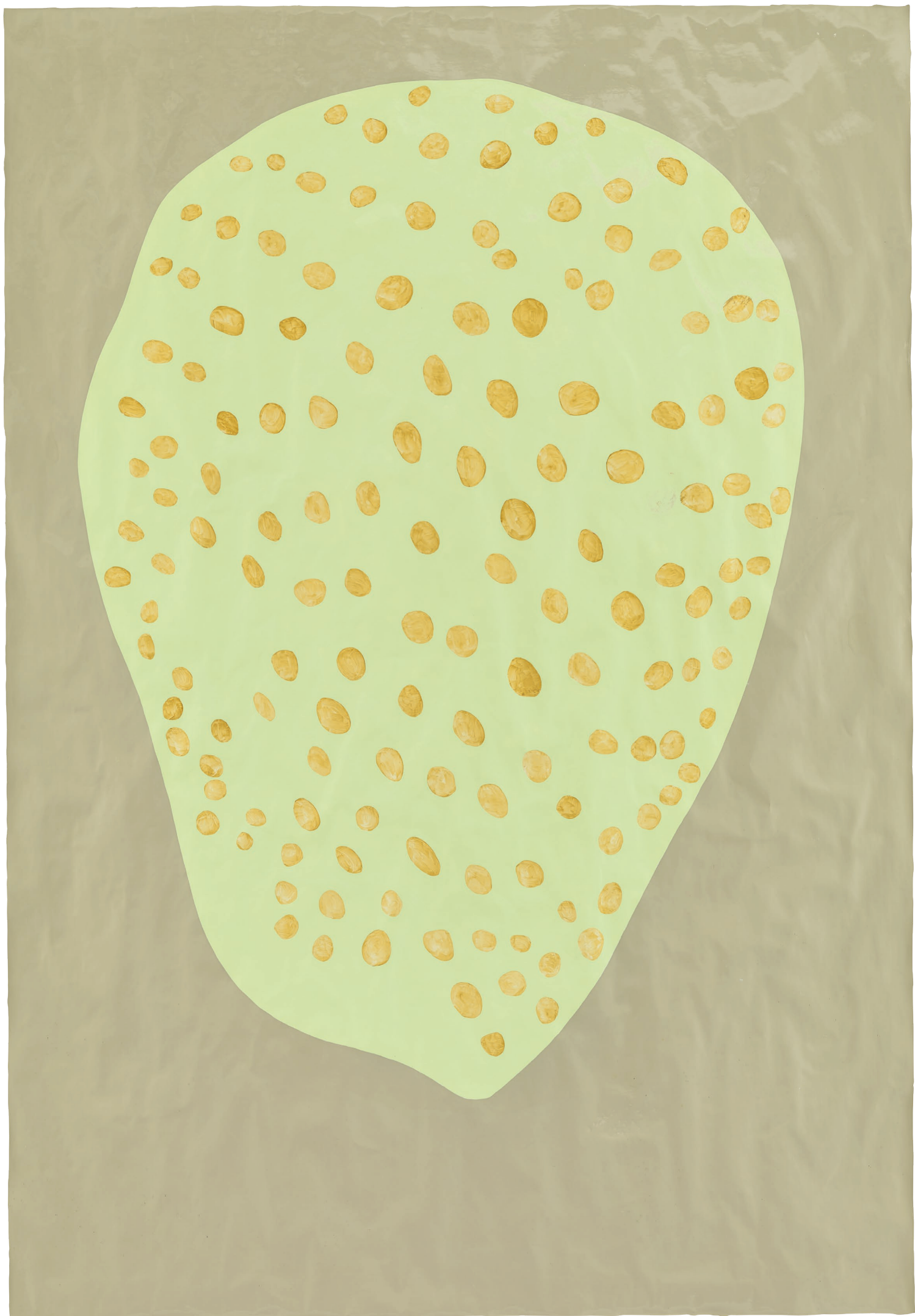
Spent, 2016

Enamel paint on aluminum

38⁵/₈ x 53¹/₈ inches; 98 x 135 cm



Green, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
77⁷/₈ x 54 inches; 198 x 137 cm



Storm, 2015
Enamel paint on aluminum
48 x 40 inches; 122 x 102 cm



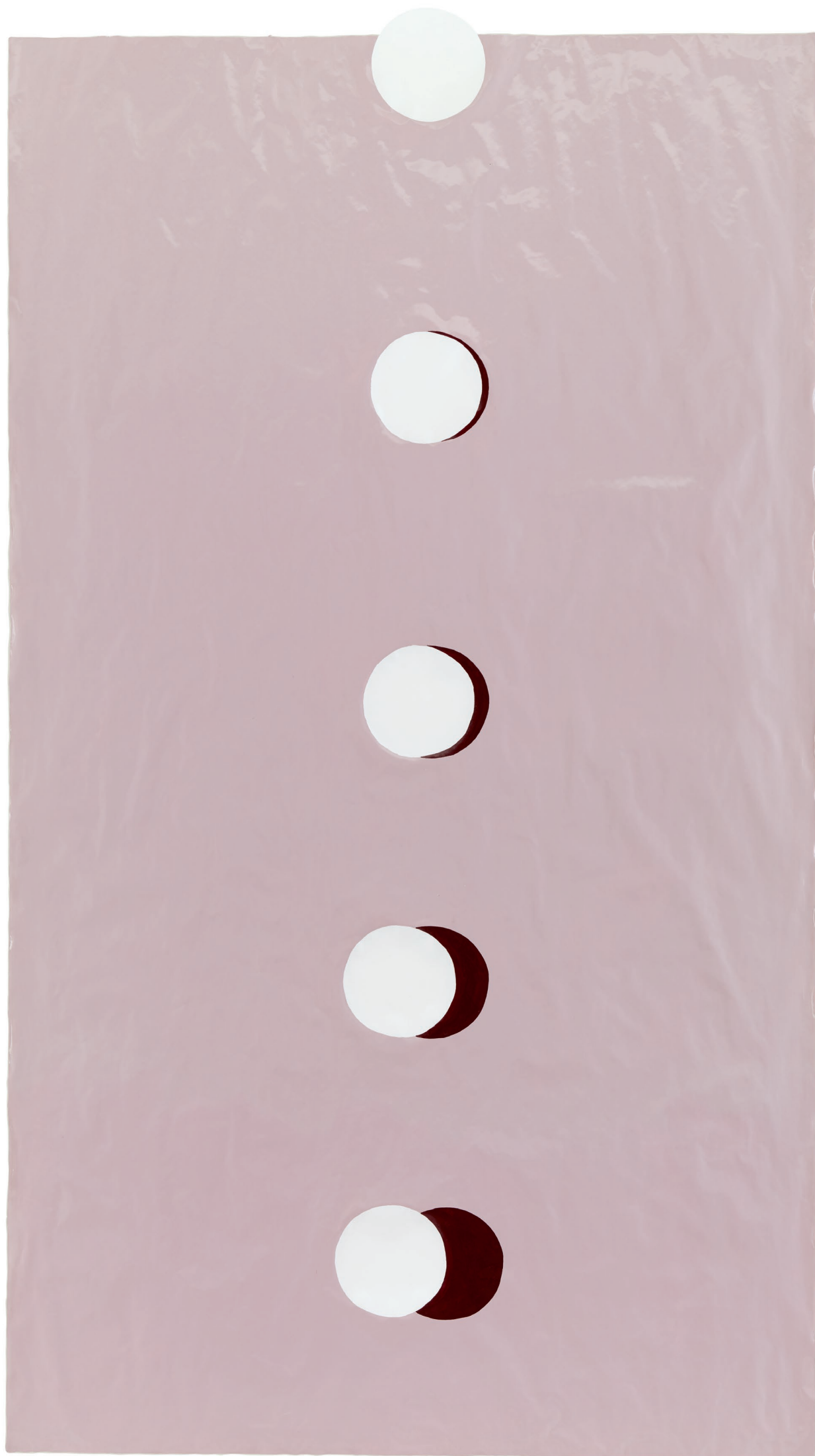
Rain, 2017
Enamel paint on paper
73⁵/₈ x 54¹/₂ inches; 187 x 138 cm



Keeping Mum, 2015
Enamel paint on aluminum
53 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 38 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches; 135 x 98 cm



Mum's Cardigan, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
80¹/₄ x 45⁷/₈ inches; 204 x 117 cm



Windbreak, 2016
Enamel paint on paper
35¼ x 89⅞ inches; 90 x 228 cm





Blind, 2016
Enamel paint on aluminum
44 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 40 inches; 112 x 102 cm



The Cutting, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
78 x 55¼ inches; 198 x 141 cm



Sunday, 2017
Enamel paint on paper
73⁵/₈ x 54⁵/₈ inches; 187 x 139 cm



The Diver, 2016–17
Enamel paint on paper
72 x 48 inches; 183 x 122 cm



Ripe, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
78 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 53 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches; 199 x 137 cm



August, 2016
Enamel paint on aluminum
48 x 40 inches; 122 x 102 cm

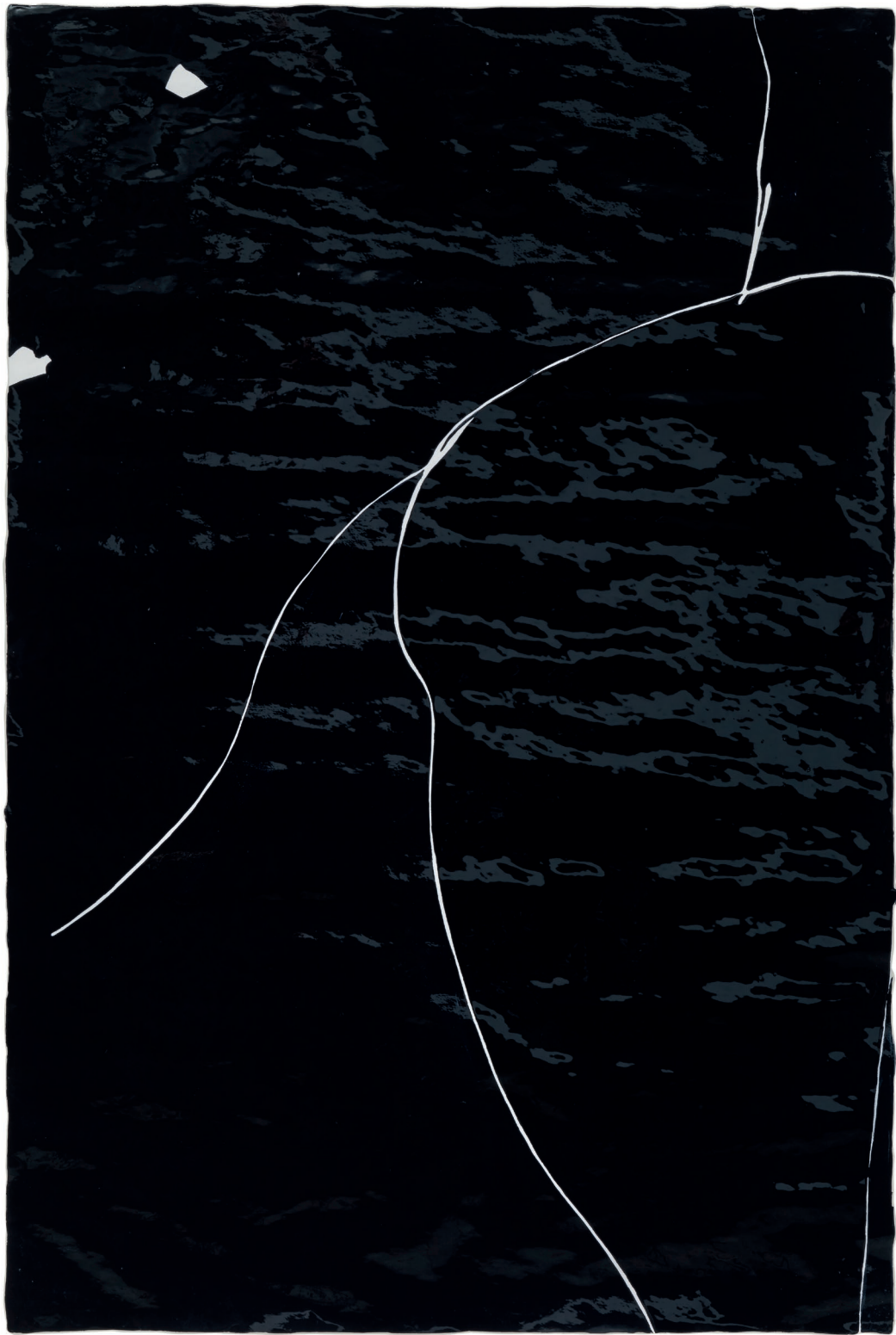


Blue Nun, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
11 ⁷/₈ x 8 ³/₈ inches; 30 x 22 cm





Mint Green Nude, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
33¼ x 22 inches; 85 x 56 cm



Nude, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
34 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 23 inches; 87 x 59 cm



Orange Blue, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
23¼ x 17¼ inches; 59 x 44 cm



Green Nude, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
22⁷/₈ x 16⁷/₈ inches; 58 x 43 cm

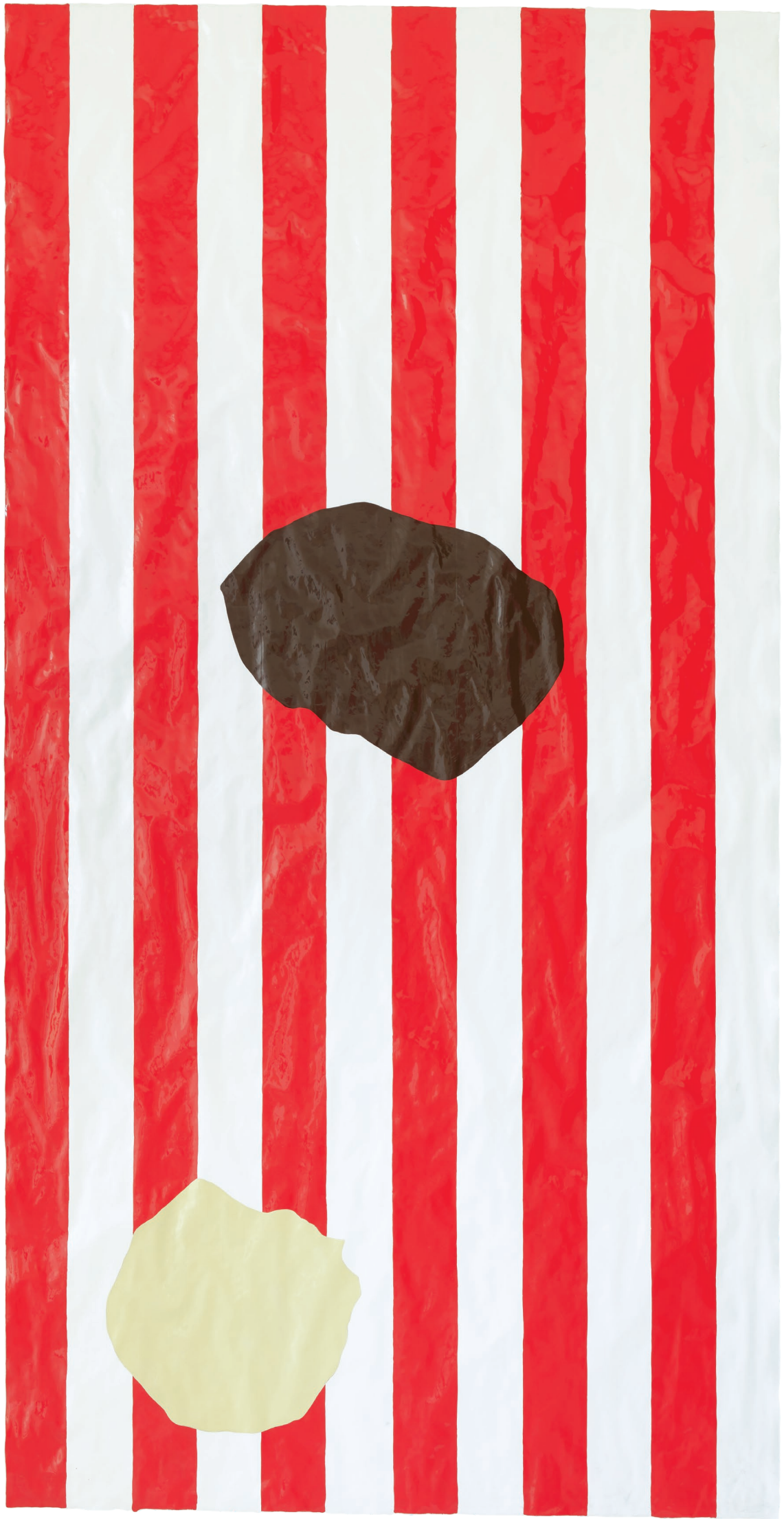
Three Leaves, 2016–17
Enamel paint on paper
73³/₄ x 54³/₄ inches; 187 x 139 cm



Camelia Rose, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
52³/₄ x 38³/₈ inches; 134 x 98 cm



Cheap Sweets, 2016
Enamel paint on paper
81¼ x 41¾ inches; 207 x 106 cm



No Light, 2016
Enamel paint on aluminum
81³/₄ x 50³/₈ inches; 208 x 128 cm



Mum in Bed, 2017

Enamel paint on aluminum

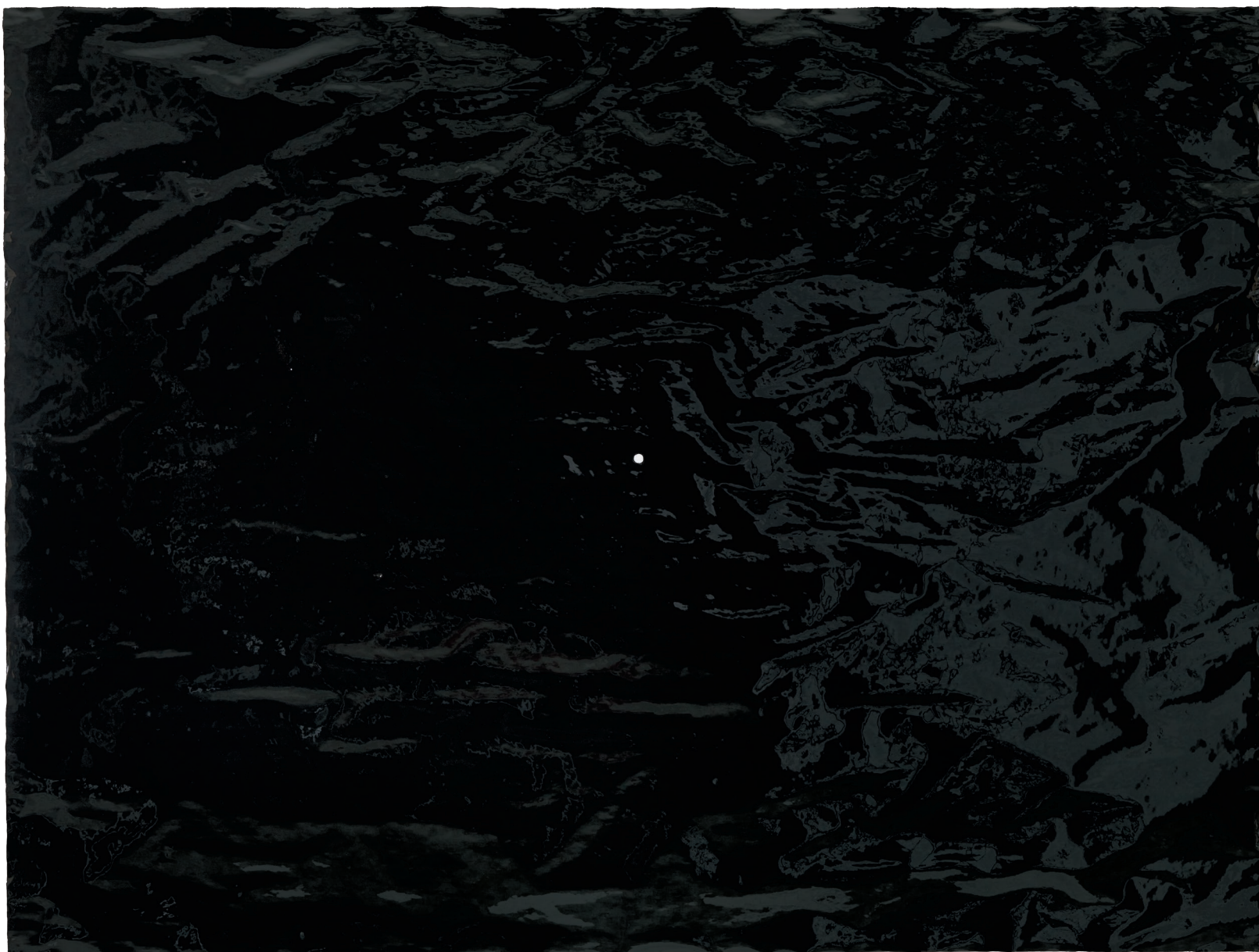
60 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 153 x 112 cm



Graved, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
53¼ x 38⅝ inches; 135 x 98 cm



Mum, 2015
Enamel paint on paper
44³/₄ x 59⁵/₈ inches; 114 x 152 cm



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Frontispiece:
Mum on the Couch, 2017
Enamel paint on aluminum
56 x 44 inches; 142 x 112 cm

Overleaf:
The artist's studio in London, July 2017

